

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Miniatures

*Persian
Painting*

A L B U M • M P

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T H E
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Miniatures

PERSIAN PAINTING
IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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ALBUM • MP



Your Own Museum of Art in Miniature

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CONTENTS

Introduction

1. <i>A Physician Preparing Medicine</i>	1224
2. <i>King Nushirwan Feasting</i>	ABOUT 1340
3. <i>Jonah and the Whale</i>	ABOUT 1390
4. <i>Alexander Comforting the Dying Darius</i>	ABOUT 1420
5. <i>Girl Dancing to the Harp (detail)</i>	ABOUT 1430
6. <i>Babram Gur Hunting</i>	ABOUT 1430
7. <i>The Black Pavilion</i>	ABOUT 1430
8. <i>Laila and Majnun in Paradise</i>	1450
9. <i>Alexander Watching the Sirens Bathing</i>	ABOUT 1475
10. <i>Crossing the River Jibun</i>	ABOUT 1436
11. <i>A Magician Brewing a Snowstorm</i>	ABOUT 1436
12. <i>The Death of Rustam</i>	1482
13. <i>Majnun Disguised as a Goat</i>	ABOUT 1490
14. <i>Dancing Dervishes</i>	ABOUT 1490
15. <i>A Game of Polo (detail)</i>	ABOUT 1540
16. <i>Khusrau Sees Shirin Bathing</i>	1525
17. <i>The Turquoise Pavilion</i>	1525
18. <i>Court Scene</i>	ABOUT 1540
19. <i>The Infant Zal Presented to His Father</i>	ABOUT 1560
20. <i>Hawking Party</i>	ABOUT 1575
21. <i>Lovers</i>	RIZA-I-'ABBASI, 1630
22. <i>Portrait of a Young Man</i>	ABOUT 1630
23. <i>Babram Gur Hunting</i>	MU'IN MUSAWWIR, 1693
24. <i>Rustam Leading the Persian Army</i>	AQA NUYAN, 1693

Suggested Reading

INTRODUCTION

PERSIAN painting is an art of book illustration; its appeal is to the senses and the imagination, and it never attempts to elevate or harrow the soul. We in the West are in danger of approaching such works as these in too sophisticated a frame of mind. The simpler—one might almost say the more childlike—our approach to these paintings, the speedier and surer will be our appreciation.

Persian artists hardly ever drew from nature; they drew out of their heads, using a set of traditional formulas. Their aim was to combine clear illustration with a pleasing decorative effect, and they felt under no obligation to reproduce such optical accidents as shadow or perspective. Everything in Persian painting is represented to the best advantage. Human figures are idealized symbols; carpets are undistorted by perspective; flowers and plants are enlarged and isolated from one another; and horizons are raised so that the figures in the foreground do not mask those behind. The purpose of the artists in using these devices was to make their work more attractive and intelligible to us. It is up to us to meet them halfway.

It will be well to begin by forming some idea of the sort of books the Persian artists were called upon to illustrate. First and foremost is the *Shah-nama*, or "Book of Kings," the national epic, completed in 1011 by the poet Firdausi. This mighty work, long accepted as historical, relates the traditional exploits of the successive kings from the legendary founder of the monarchy to the middle of the 7th century when the Arab invasions turned Persia into a Muhammadan country.

The first half of the poem is entirely mythical, with many stories of dragons, demons, and enchantment. The main theme is the long struggle between Iran (Persia) and Turan (the Turks), in which the Persian hero Rustam is the central figure. An historical element creeps in with Iskandar (Alexander the Great), but many of his adventures are as fantastic as anything earlier in the poem. Finally, with the rise of the Sasanian dynasty early in the 3rd century, the narrative of Firdausi becomes broadly historical, though a dragon occasionally is encountered.

Nizami and other later poets often wrote verses around characters and episodes of the *Shah-nama*, such as the hunting exploits of Bahram Gur or the loves of Khusrau and Shirin. But they also introduced themes from elsewhere, like the tragic Arabian love story of Laila and Majnun or the biblical tale of Yusuf (Joseph) and Zulaykha (Potiphar's wife). Apart from these epic and romantic poems, Persian artists were sometimes called upon to illustrate copies of prose histories, collections of fables, or scientific treatises; but the best miniatures are always found in the works of the poets. Only from about the middle of the 16th century was there any demand for separate pictures, and even these, though not strictly book illustrations, were carried out in the same miniature technique and were bound in albums.

Islam has always frowned on the representation of animate beings in art, but in Persia painter and patron alike cheerfully faced orthodox disapproval and have bequeathed us a series of exquisite works which, within their acknowledged limitations, are as perfect as human skill can make them.



A PHYSICIAN PREPARING MEDICINE

1 • A PHYSICIAN PREPARING MEDICINE, 1224. Height $6\frac{1}{4}$ "

THE cradle of Persian painting as we know it was Baghdad, the splendid capital of the Abbasid caliphs and the center of the whole Muslim world. Many of the key positions under the successive Commanders of the Faithful were occupied by Persians, and the art and culture of Baghdad were to a great extent Persian in inspiration. But few illustrated books have survived from this period. The examples we have are either books of fables, copies of the *Makamat*—a work in elegant rhymed prose describing the escapades, often highly disreputable, of an old rascal named Abu Zaid—or else scientific treatises of various kinds.

The Arabs did civilization a great service by keeping alive and developing the scientific ideas of the Greeks at a time when Europe was sunk in the Dark Ages, and many classical works were translated into Arabic. One of these was the *Materia*

Medica of Dioscorides, a Greek who lived during the first century of our era, treating of plants and their uses; A Physician Preparing Medicine (no. 1) above illustrates an Arabic version of this work. The style is simple and formal, with the figures on a single plane; but these works of the Baghdad school often show an acute observation of human nature and sometimes a lively sense of humor.

IN 1258 the Mongol hordes, which had already made Persia a desert of smoking ruins and unburied corpses, arrived before Baghdad. The great city fell and was sacked for a whole week by the barbarians. Over a million of its inhabitants were slaughtered, its libraries were burnt or torn up to provide litter for the horses, its works of art were broken up, and its fine buildings were defaced or destroyed.



KING NUSHIRWAN FEASTING

2 • KING NUSHIRWAN FEASTING, *about 1340. Height 8¼"*

It is small wonder that so few of the earlier manuscripts have survived.

The Mongols settled in the territories they had overrun, and in Persia they gradually absorbed the culture and adopted the religion of their subjects. The Mongol conquests, which included China, had the effect of bringing East and West into much closer touch, so it is not surprising to find strong Chinese influence in the painting produced in Persia at this time. By far the greatest monument of this mixed style was a splendid copy of the *Shah-nama* that was brought to Europe early in the present century. It was quickly broken up, as frequently happens when fine manuscripts go through the hands of dealers, and the numerous miniatures were dispersed. The dating of this manuscript and its illustrations, one of which (no. 2) is reproduced here, is still a matter of

controversy, complicated by the fact that the miniatures differ considerably in style, being clearly the work of several artists. The generally accepted date is about 1330-1340, but a strong case has been made for a generation later, which the mature style of the best miniatures seems to support when they are compared with earlier dated works.

Our miniature represents King Nushirwan (reigned 531-578) eating food served by the two sons of his vizier Mahbud. A jealous rival of the vizier had the food poisoned by means of a spell, and the unfortunate young men, their father, and his whole family were executed for attempting the life of the King. The promoted rival, however, gave himself away later in conversation with Nushirwan, and he and his magician confederate went to the gallows. In these miniatures we can see that the Persian artists took over a

number of Chinese formulas just as they stood—such as the conventions for trees, rocks, and clouds—but that these alien elements have not yet been digested into a homogeneous national style.

THE evolution of a true national style coincided, oddly enough, with another baptism of blood and fire. After a respite of little more than a century Persia was again overrun by the warriors of Central Asia, this time under Tamerlane, or Timur, whose descendants, the Timurids, continued to rule in various Persian cities until the beginning of the 16th century. Our next two paintings (nos. 3 and 4) belong to the very beginning of the Timurid period, the turn of the 14th-15th centuries. Both illustrate a history of the world called *Jami' al-Tawarikh* ("Collection of Histories"), though they come from different copies. This monu-

mental work, written by the scholar-statesman Rashid al-Din at the beginning of the 14th century, was the sum of historical knowledge at the time, incorporating biblical stories like that of Jonah and the "whale" (no. 3), the vicissitudes of the Persian kings already traced by Firdausi in the *Shah-nama*, and a vast quantity of other material drawn from every available source.

The representation of Alexander (no. 4) may startle Western eyes, which naturally look for the brazen corselet and plumed helmet of classical art. But in medieval Europe it was the artist's invariable practice to depict historical characters in the garb of his own time—in modern dress so to speak—so we need not be surprised that the Persian painter has shown the Macedonian conqueror as a Timurid prince such as his own patron may have been.



JONAH AND THE WHALE

Persian national pride gave the story of Alexander a curious twist. It was maintained that King Darab (Darius) married a daughter of Philip of Macedon but became displeased with her after a very short time and sent her back to her father, where she gave birth to Alexander. Meanwhile Darab remarried, and when he died he was succeeded by his younger son Dara (Darius III). Alexander's subsequent invasion of Persia was thus not an alien conquest at all but a just war to claim the throne to which he was the rightful heir. When the unfortunate Dara was murdered after his defeat by Alexander the latter comforted the dying man and meted out swift justice to the traitors.

THE Timurid style, of which these two paintings (nos. 3 and 4) are among the earliest examples, represents the final harmonious blending of all the

various factors and influences that had been at work on Persian painting during the preceding centuries. Compared with the Mongol style the best Timurid painting is richer and more brilliant in color, more delicate in drawing, and its compositions are conceived on a larger scale. The last vestiges of the single plane convention, which we found at Baghdad in the 13th century and which persisted throughout the Mongol period, disappear early in the 15th century from all but a few northern provincial works. Its place is taken by the "high horizon" convention, whereby the ground is seen as it were from above, so that figures can be spaced out in various planes without interfering with one another; Bahram Gur Hunting (no. 6) is a good example.

These changes mark the great turning point in the history of Persian painting—the moment when it really found itself.



ALEXANDER COMFORTING THE DYING DARIUS



GIRL DANCING TO THE HARP, DETAIL

5 • GIRL DANCING TO THE HARP (detail), about 1430. Height of detail 3½"

The earliest surviving dated examples of the new style are to be found in a copy of the *Shah-nama* made at Shiraz in 1370. But it is not until 1396 that we find its possibilities fully realized. In that year a manuscript, now in the British Museum, London, was produced at Baghdad (which had somewhat recovered from the Mongol devastation) for Sultan Ahmad of the Jalairid dynasty, a volatile prince well known for his artistic and literary tastes. One of the seven magnificent miniatures it contains bears the artist's signature—the only known instance for a century—and his name, Junaid *Sultani* ("in the royal service"), deserves to be remembered as that of the foremost pioneer of the new style. It seems almost as if he felt the importance of his achievement in bringing it to perfection and so determined on the unprecedented step of putting his name to his work, which he

did very discreetly, working it into a stucco panel on one of the buildings.

The new style was enthusiastically patronized by several of the princes who divided Timur's vast empire after his death. Among them his grandson Baisunkur Mirza stands out as one of the great art patrons and bibliophiles of all time. A whole series of exquisitely illuminated and illustrated manuscripts was produced for him at Herat, in the northeast, where he was viceroy for his father Shah Rukh from 1415 until his early death (from drink) in 1433. He maintained a considerable staff of painters, illuminators, and calligraphers, and there can be little doubt that the manuscript containing the paintings reproduced in numbers 5, 6, and 7 was made for him. It is a copy of a romantic poem by Nizami, describing the exploits of the Sasanian monarch Bahram Gur in love and in the chase. Girl



BAHRAM GUR HUNTING. BY MU'IN MUSAWWIR

6·BAHRAM GUR
HUNTING, *about 1430*
Height 8 1/8"

Dancing to the Harp (no. 5), a charming detail from an elaborate miniature unsuitable for full reproduction on our small scale, illustrates the meticulous execution, fine drawing, and brilliant color scheme of Baisunkur's court painters.

Bahram Gur had a favorite slave girl of great beauty who used to accompany him on his hunting expeditions, playing her harp. One day she challenged him to show his skill. A wild ass appeared, and the King loosed an arrow which grazed its ear so lightly that it raised its hoof to scratch the place, whereupon with a second arrow he pinned its hoof to its ear. The girl pertly dismissed the feat as a case of "practice makes perfect," and the

King, who had expected extravagant praise, was so enraged that he dismissed her from the court. A few years later he was hunting in the same locality when to his astonishment he saw a veiled girl carrying a cow on her shoulders up the outside stairs of a house. He summoned her and enquired how she managed to do it. She explained that she had done so every day since the cow was a newborn calf; her strength had grown proportionately with the animal's weight. "It is a case of 'practice makes perfect,'" she concluded, raising her veil. One need hardly add that beneath it were revealed the features of the former favorite and that King Bahram showed his apprecia-

tion of her wit and resourcefulness by taking her back to the palace with him.

On another occasion Bahram found in a remote chamber of his palace the portraits of seven beautiful princesses, daughters of the Kings of the Seven Climates. With truly royal magnanimity he decided to marry them all, and did so, building for each a pavilion of a different color, representing the Seven Planets. He visited them in turn during the first week after the collective marriage, and each princess told him a story before they retired for the night. In the miniature (no. 7) below he is depicted in the Black Pavilion dedicated to Saturn, being entertained by the Princess of India.

WHILE Baisunkur ruled at Herat in the northeast his brother Ibrahim Sultan held court at Shiraz in the southwest. He too was a lover of fine books, and his artists, though not of such consummate skill as those employed by his brother, evolved a style of their own, bolder and simpler at first than that of Herat, that continued to be practiced at Shiraz until after the middle of the 15th century. Good examples of this Shiraz style are to be found in another manuscript of Nizami's poems, dated 1450, from which number 8 is reproduced. Nizami's *Khamasa*, or "Quintet," of romantic poems, was second only to the *Shah-nama* in popularity, and it exists in

7·THE BLACK PAVILION
about 1430. Height 6"



THE BLACK PAVILION

many finely illustrated copies. We have already seen that one of the poems of the "Quintet" is concerned with Bahram Gur; for another of his subjects Nizami took the Arabian story of the loves of Laila and Majnun. Family differences kept the lovers apart, and Majnun became demented. Laila was forced into marriage with a man in whom she felt no interest and soon died. Majnun expired on her tomb, and it was not until they reached paradise that these true lovers were united.

WE MUST NOT think of these Persian miniatures as being produced only at the great centers like Baghdad, Herat,

and Shiraz. The miniature of Alexander Watching the Sirens Bathing (no. 9) comes from another copy of Nizami's *Khamisa* that was probably executed at Isfahan, a city later the capital of Persia. Isfahan at this time had no tradition of painting like Herat and Shiraz, but it seems to have come within the artistic orbit of the latter. It is perhaps unnecessary to state that this particular escapade of Alexander finds no place in the standard history books, but then neither does his encounter with the Angel Israfil, nor his conversation with the Talking Tree, nor his discovery of the Well of Eternal Life, nor his building of an iron wall against the hosts of Gog and Magog. But



8·LAILA AND MAJNUN
IN PARADISE, 1450
Height 4¾"

9·ALEXANDER
WATCHING THE SIRENS
BATHING, *about 1475*
Height 7"



ALEXANDER WATCHING THE SIRENS BATHING

all these surprising events are related of him by Firdausi and Nizami and are frequently illustrated by the Persian painters. Nizami narrates how, when Alexander reached China, he made an expedition to the seashore in company with the Chinese Emperor and a band of chosen followers to view the nightly appearance of the sea nymphs or sirens, who came up on shore at nightfall and diverted themselves with singing, dancing, and games until the dawn, when they vanished again into the water. We may notice in this example one misfortune that often befalls Persian miniatures: the silver paint used for the water (and armor and weapons) has turned black.

THE 15th century was a time of great political confusion. Many upstart princelings established themselves more or less briefly in outlying provincial cities, and sometimes one would succeed in founding a short-lived dynasty. Such men were often anxious to gain reputations as persons of taste and patrons of the arts, as befitted a ruling prince, however circumscribed and precarious their dominions, and so they too had illustrated copies of the *Shah-nama* and the *Khamisa* made for their libraries. The Timurid princes of Herat and Shiraz and later, as we shall see, the Turkman rulers, seem to have monopolized the best academic talent, but the humbler painters who



CROSSING THE RIVER JIHUN

10 • CROSSING THE RIVER JIHUN, about 1436. Height 7¼"

worked for the minor provincial potentates were by no means devoid of ability. Indeed, their work often has great interest and much naïve charm; what they may lack in academic polish they make up in freshness and vigor. Their styles are unpredictable, fluctuating between extreme archaism and startling originality. Thus we may find in their work, particularly in the north, a few remaining traces of the Mongol style, but the same painter, working on his own and bound to no particular academic tradition, will often display a marked individuality in the subjects he chooses to illustrate and in his manner of treating them. We are far more likely to find little personal touches in the works of the provincial painters than in the more standardized products of the Herat academy.

Alexander Watching the Sirens Bathing, as we have seen, was probably ex-

ecuted at Isfahan, and may thus be described as southern provincial work. Crossing the River Jihun and A Magician Brewing a Snowstorm (nos. 10 and 11) are more likely to be the products of some northern provincial center; they come from a *Shah-nama* long since broken up. The Museum possesses a set of twelve miniatures from it, and others are dispersed in ones and twos in various galleries and private collections. We can see that the drawing and execution are rough when compared with the work of Baisunkur's artists, but the miniatures are bold, vigorous, and highly decorative.

One of the most tragic incidents in the earlier part of the *Shah-nama* is the murder of the young Persian prince Siyawush by the villain of the piece, Afrasiyab, King of Turan. Siyawush left a young son, Kai Khusrau, who went into hiding from Afrasiyab with his

mother, until one of the Persian champions was sent into Turan, where they were known to be, to rescue them and bring them back to Persia. This was accomplished after many adventures, and the three are here seen swimming their horses across the river Jihun (Oxus), which divided Persia from the realm of Afrasiyab.

Soon after assuming the crown Kai Khusrau sent a punitive expedition against his father's murderer under the leadership of the experienced general Tus. But owing to the latter's hotheadedness and perversity the expedition began badly by destroying a friendly frontier castle and killing the young prince who held it. From then on misfortune dogged the Persians as they advanced into hostile country. They were defeated in battle, and to add to their misfortunes the enemy sent a wizard up

into a mountain overlooking the Persian position where he conjured up a blinding snowstorm from which they suffered terribly. Although they eventually detected this ruse and sent a warrior up the mountain to eliminate the wizard, the Persians were still in desperate straits until the arrival of reinforcements under the hero Rustam who, as usual, saved the situation.

DURING the first half of the 15th century the Timurid princes found themselves in frequent conflict with two clans of Turkmans living on the western confines of Persia and known from their tribal totems as the "White Sheep" and the "Black Sheep." These two clans also fought one another, but soon after the middle of the century Uzun Hasan ("Long Hasan"), leader of the White Sheep, defeated all his rivals and ruled the whole of Persia with the exception



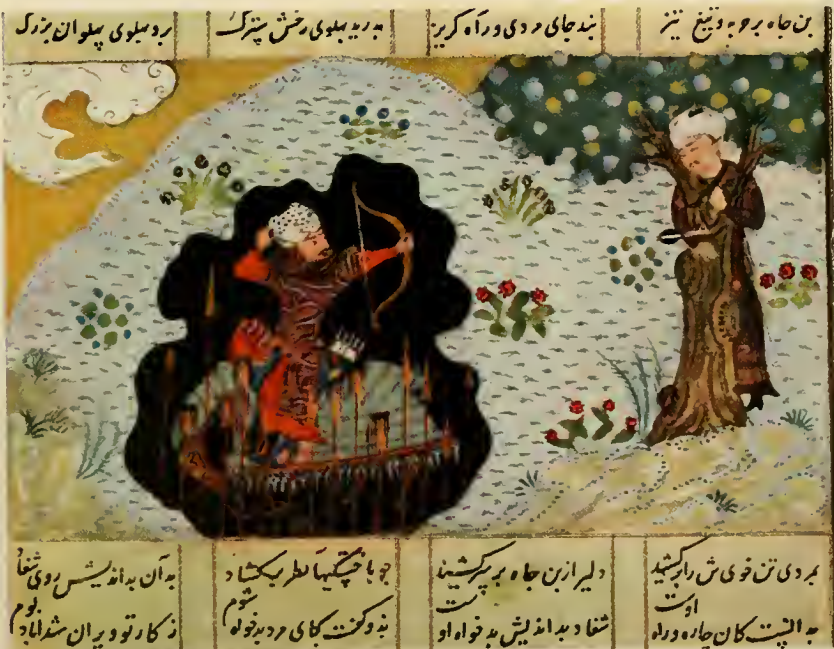
A MAGICIAN BREWING A SNOWSTORM

of the northeastern province of Khurasan.

Under the Turkman rule we find a new style coming to the fore. It seems to have originated in the northwest, having features in common with provincial work from Mazandaran and Shamakha on the Caspian Sea but had established itself as far south as Isfahan and Shiraz soon after the middle of the century when both cities were in the hands of the Turkmans. There are several manuscripts dating from between 1440 and 1460 containing miniatures in what may be called the Turkman style alongside others of the Shiraz-Timurid type exemplified by Laila and Majnun in Paradise, but the latter seems soon to have been completely superseded. This Turkman style was to some extent a throw-back to the previous century; the figures are short and stocky, the treatment is simple, and the effect is broad. It was no doubt prac-

ticed at several cities in the Turkman dominions, but a number of examples are definitely dated from Shiraz between 1480 and 1504, so we may fairly assume that this was its main center during its maturity.

The first of the two examples of the Turkman style here shown (no. 12) illustrates the tragic death of the hero Rustam, which closes the first part of the *Shah-nama*. The manuscript from which it is taken is dated 1482. Rustam had been invited on a hunting expedition by the King of Kabul, at whose court lived the hero's young half brother Shaghad. Shaghad had always been jealous of Rustam, and he now persuaded the King of Kabul to join him in a scheme to get rid of the champion. Accordingly, they caused a number of pits to be dug along the route the hunt would take, setting spears and swords upright in them and



THE DEATH OF RUSTAM
12. THE DEATH OF RUSTAM, 1402. 121811 3/8



MAJNUN DISGUISED AS A GOAT

13. MAJNUN DISGUISED AS A GOAT, about 1490. Height 4½"

covering them lightly with brushwood. Rustam rode unsuspectingly into one, suffering terrible wounds, but in spite of its injuries his gallant horse managed to struggle out of the pit, only to fall into the next. At length, exhausted from loss of blood, the dying hero reproached his treacherous brother and with a supreme effort sent an arrow straight through the trunk of a tree into the heart of the wretch who had taken refuge behind it. The treatment of the pit in this miniature is interesting and typical. The Persian artist, as a conscientious illustrator, is determined that we shall not miss any detail of the story, so he shows us the

inside of the pit bristling with spears, upon which Rustam and his steed are impaled, and, incidentally, throws them into relief in a very striking manner against the black background.

The other Turkman style miniature (no. 13) illustrates an episode in the story of Laila and Majnun as told by the poet Jami. The demented Majnun has disguised himself as a goat in order to gain a sight of his beloved and approaches her encampment among the flock of an old goatherd. The disguise does not appear to be very effective, but this may be partly due to the artist's anxiety that we should not miss the point.



DANCING DERVISHES

14 • DANCING DERVISHES, *about 1490. Height 6¼"*

MEANWHILE in Khurasan, with its capital Herat, the last great Timurid, Sultan Husain Mirza, was enjoying a long and prosperous reign (1468-1506) surrounded by the foremost writers and artists of the time. Among the latter was the greatest of all Persian painters, Bihzad, whose work began to appear about 1480. Herat was untouched by the Turkman style, and its tradition of painting was unbroken throughout the 15th century. Bihzad was thus the direct successor of the painters who had worked for Prince Baisunkur (see nos. 5, 6, and 7). But in his hands the formality and occasional stiffness of the academic style

were relaxed, and it was given added life and variety. He was not content merely to reproduce the stock compositions and formulas inherited from his teachers. He seems to have gone direct to nature for much of his inspiration, though he never infringed the basic canons of Persian painting. His figures are recognizable as individuals, and his landscape backgrounds are far more realistic (though no less beautiful and decorative) than those of his predecessors. Naturally Bihzad had many followers and imitators, and his name has been put to many works that bear not the faintest resemblance to his style. But the dancing dervishes of

number 14, with their masterly rhythm, original coloring, and superb execution, may well be from the master's brush. Bihzad ended his life, probably about 1530, as supervisor of book production for the royal libraries.

BIHZAD'S STYLE persisted, though with a steady degeneration, throughout the 16th century at Bukhara, to the north-east across the River Oxus; for in 1507 Shaibani Khan, chief of the Uzbeks of Transoxiana, invaded Khurasan and took Herat, transporting a number of the Herat painters into his own dominions. The Uzbek capital was later fixed at Bukhara, and there, in the service of successive Shaibanid princes, these artists and the pupils they trained carried on Bihzad's tradition. They were cut off from the main stream of Persian painting and were completely unaffected by the

various modifications of the court style which, as we shall see, took place during the 16th century. But, inevitably, lack of fresh inspiration produced sterility and dullness; the later Bukhara artists were mere copyists, and often bad ones at that, reproducing with ever diminishing finish the now hackneyed formulas of Bihzad.

A Game of Polo (no. 15) is a detail from a miniature in a Bukhara manuscript probably of the second quarter of the 16th century, when the vigor and freshness of Bihzad's work had not yet faded away. Polo has been played in Persia from a very early period. In the *Shah-nama* Firdausi relates that several princes of the legendary era, including the unlucky Siyawush, were expert players, and there is no doubt that a form of the game was played under the Sasanian dynasty (226-652). A magnificent polo ground, laid out in the 17th century, is still to be



A GAME OF POLO, DETAIL

seen at Isfahan, and the stone goal posts, similar to the pair in the foreground of the miniature, are still *in situ*.

MEANWHILE in Persia proper a great political revolution had taken place. Timurids and Turkmans alike were swept away by a national revival under Shah Isma'il Safavi, founder of the Safavid dynasty, the first truly national dynasty to rule over the whole of Persia since the last Sasanian had been driven out by the Arabs eight and a half centuries earlier. Isma'il, who was descended both from the Sasanians and from the Prophet's nephew 'Ali, assumed the crown at Tabriz, in the northwestern

corner of Persia, in 1502. When the kingdom was settled and he could turn to the arts of peace, he took Bihzad into his service; so it is natural to find court painting for the next quarter century entirely molded by the master's style.

One of the finest Persian manuscripts in the Metropolitan Museum, from which Khusrau Sees Shirin Bathing and The Turquoise Pavilion (nos. 16 and 17) are reproduced, is a copy of the *Khamisa* of Nizami, dated 1525, whose miniatures give an excellent idea of early Safavid painting at its best. The manner and palette of Bihzad are retained, but the compositions are expanding, and the figures are becoming more supple and con-



16-KHUSRAU SEES
SHIRIN BATHING, 1525
Height 5 1/8"

KHUSRAU SEES SHIRIN BATHING

17. THE TURQUOISE
PAVILION, 1525
Height 6¼"



THE TURQUOISE PAVILION

sciously elegant. Immediately noticeable are the turbans wound round a slender baton, which was the badge of the Safavids for the first fifty-odd years of their rule. This manuscript was formerly in the Persian royal library but left that country in the early years of this century when the King of Kings was suffering financial embarrassment. It is said that when his ladies became particularly importunate he would give them a volume from the Royal Library and tell them to sell it for whatever they could get and buy themselves new dresses or jewelry with the proceeds. No doubt many fine Persian manuscripts and other works of art thus found their way to the West.

Number 16 shows the first encounter of the Persian prince Khusrau and the Armenian princess Shirin; each was already in love with the other from portraits and descriptions. Khusrau, who had offended his father, was on his way into exile, while Shirin had disguised herself in male attire and was on her way to Persia to seek out her prince. Their paths thus unexpectedly crossed, but Shirin did not see Khusrau riding by as she was refreshing herself in a mountain pool, and he modestly refrained on this occasion from disclosing his presence. Number 17 shows the Princess of the West entertaining King Bahram Gur in the Turquoise Pavilion (see no. 7).



COURT SCENE

18. COURT SCENE
about 1540
Height 7¼"

SHAH ISMA'IL's son and successor, Tahmasp, came to the throne in 1526 and was at first a liberal and enlightened patron of painting. He employed a number of first-rate artists, of whom the greatest was Sultan Muhammad, and their works are among the most sumptuous and exquisite in the whole of Persian painting. They worked, for example, from 1539 to 1543 on the production of a lavishly illustrated copy of Nizami's *Khamsa* that has been described as the finest Persian manuscript in existence. It is now in the British Museum, London.

Court Scene (no. 18), though on a comparatively modest scale, gives a good idea of this mature court style. It has

developed and expanded considerably since the time of Bihzad; the figures in particular are larger in proportion but have lost some of the strength and freshness of the 15th century. The miniature is probably the left-hand half of a double-page composition forming the frontispiece of a manuscript. From at least the early 14th century it was a frequent practice to provide manuscripts with double-page frontispieces of this kind. They usually show the prince for whom the manuscript in question was executed holding his court, but variations are sometimes encountered depicting him in battle, hunting, or playing polo. One *Shah-nama* produced for Ibrahim Sultan,

the Timurid prince of Shiraz, about 1430, contains four such frontispieces, the first three showing an out-door court scene, a battle, and a hunt respectively, while the fourth represents the prince surrounded by courtiers in his throne room, whilst his queen and her ladies look out on the palace garden from a balcony window. Other Shiraz frontispieces of a few years later show Chinese ambassadors received in audience. These were, at any rate till the mid-16th century, almost the only scenes of contemporary life which the Persian artists were called upon to render and are also interesting as sometimes containing recognizable portraits.

Our next miniature (no. 19) shows the

court art at a slightly later stage. The scale has enlarged further; drawing and color have become hard and set; the suppleness and warmth of the works of a generation earlier, such as the Court Scene, have been lost. The subject of the miniature is the infant Zal, who later became the father of the hero Rustam, being presented to his father Sam. The child was unfortunately born with white hair, which was considered such a bad omen that Sam ordered him to be exposed on a mountain. The baby was rescued and raised by the wondrous bird Simurgh, which eventually restored him to his father after the latter had been reproved in a dream for his superstitious cruelty.



19. THE INFANT ZAL
PRESENTED TO HIS
FATHER, about 1560
Height 13 1/4"

THE INFANT ZAL PRESENTED TO HIS FATHER

Soon after 1570 the Safavid capital was transferred to Kazvin, and this move coincides with certain modifications in the court style. As was usually the case, these are traceable to the genius of an individual artist, Muhammadi, a native of Herat. His figures are slim and elegant, the faces being rounder and the necks longer than in the Tabriz style of the earlier 16th century. It was as a draughtsman that Muhammadi excelled, and several of his best-authenticated works are line drawings with touches of color.

Perhaps the increasing demand for separate drawings and miniatures intended for mounting in albums was also due to Muhammadi. Hawking Party (no. 20) is

an excellent example of these, and gives a good idea of Muhammadi's style. The production of a complete illuminated and illustrated manuscript of fine quality was a long and expensive business, beyond the purses of all but the Royal Family and a few of the richest nobility. But these separate pictures were within the means of many men of culture who, now that the country was settled, could indulge their tastes in peace. They were also popular with the artists themselves, it seems, giving them an opportunity to get away for a moment from Rostam and Khusrau and all the other stock characters of their repertoire and to paint everyday life or figure studies and portraits.



20. HAWKING PARTY
about 1575
Height 10½"

21. *LOVERS signed*
 Riza-i-'Abbasi, 1630
 Height 7 $\frac{1}{8}$ "



LOVERS, SIGNED RIZA I-ABBASI

SOON after the accession of Shah 'Abbas the Great in 1585 the capital was moved from Kazvin to Isfahan, and at about the same time another artist of genius appeared on the scene, whose individual style caused a far more pronounced change in the trend of Persian painting than had that of Muhammadi. This was Aqa Riza, of whom a brief account is given by the historian Iskandar Munshi. The latter, writing in 1616, says that Aqa Riza had then taken to low company and neglected his art for some time, though a painter of great ability, particularly in single-figure subjects. Most of his work may be dated in the last decade of the 16th century.

The outstanding feature of the style he developed is the calligraphic line, which varies constantly in strength and thickness, thus effectively suggesting volume in figures and drapery without the use of shading. The style was taken up by Riza-i-'Abbasi, most of whose work belongs to the second quarter of the 17th century, though one or two of his early drawings are dated before 1620. He was an artist of a lesser stature than Aqa Riza but was enormously prolific. In his hands the new style acquired some tedious mannerisms and a color scheme in which purple, yellow, and brown are prominent, in contrast to the pure brilliant colors of the earlier periods. His figures,



22 · PORTRAIT OF A
YOUNG MAN, *about*
1630. Height 6½"

PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG MAN

with their large eyes and curling ringlets, are posed in languorous attitudes, often holding wine cups and bottles, and they have a markedly erotic flavor. A more characteristic example of his work than the pair of lovers in number 21 could hardly be found, and the elegant and be-whiskered young man above (no. 22) follows his style closely, though this painting does not bear his signature.

It was a century when many European travelers visited Persia, and their lively accounts, in some cases illustrated with copperplate engravings, confirm the impression these paintings give of the manners of the time. The "Ganymed boies," with their downy side whiskers

and rich brocades, are prominent in these descriptions. They served wine at royal banquets and were by far the most popular subjects of Riza-i-Abbasi and his followers and therefore, presumably, of their patrons. In spite of the express prohibition of Islam, a great deal of wine was drunk on these occasions, and some of the European guests disgraced themselves badly, like the Russian ambassador described by Chardin, who had to use his fur cap to "disembogue" in the presence of the Shah, and later, forgetting he had done so, replaced it on his head.

But in spite of the mass of separate miniatures and drawings produced during this period, there was still a demand

for illustrated manuscripts of the old favorites, Firdausi, Nizami, and the rest. The best of these are large and lavish, like the splendid *Shah-nama* of 1648 in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, which contains no less than 148 full-page miniatures, and another contemporary copy at Leningrad which has nearly 200. But the style is unsuited to epic illustration, and the kings and heroes lose much of the dignity and strength with which the Timurid painters had invested them.

The last two reproductions (nos. 23 and 24) are taken from a large *Shah-nama* of this type in the Metropolitan Museum. Number 23, illustrating the favorite subject of Bahram Gur hunting

with his mistress (see no. 6), is signed by Mu'in Musawwir, a pupil of Riza-i-'Abbasi, but Rustam Leading the Persian Army (no. 24) reveals a thoroughly European technique. Both are dated 1693. Towards the end of the 17th century a Persian artist named Muhammad Zaman traveled to Italy, picked up the current Italian style, and introduced it into Persia on his return. The present miniature, one of several contributed to this *Shah-nama* manuscript by the otherwise unknown Aqa Nuyan, shows us the result.

THE 18th century in Persia was politically turbulent and artistically sterile, but under Fath 'Ali Shah (1797-

23. BAHRAM GUR
HUNTING by
Mu'in Musawwir
1693. Height 8 3/4"



BAHRAM GUR HUNTING



RUSTAM LEADING THE PERSIAN ARMY, BY AQA NUYAN

24 · RUSTAM LEADING THE PERSIAN ARMY *by Aqa Nuyan, 1693. Height 9"*

1834) there was a revival, and many paintings were produced both as illustrations to books and in the form of large portraits in oils. European influence is everywhere paramount, but the best of the many surviving portraits of Fath 'Ali Shah himself, emphasizing his majestic black beard, wasp waist, and flashing jewels, are dignified and impressive. Nor should we forget the numerous paintings of his "little ladies," of whom he maintained a huge establishment; some of these, remarkable for their languishing glances and provocative *deshabille*, are by no means unattractive.

Since that period, however, little of

note has been achieved by Persian painters. A group of works by the foremost modern miniaturists exhibited in London in July 1947 revealed an undiminished technical skill, but a rather confused approach, hesitating between a too rigid traditionalism and a mood of half-hearted concession to Western ideas. Persian painting today needs an inspired and inspiring genius—a new Bihzad or Aqa Riza. In the past, as we have seen in the foregoing pages, such a figure always seemed to be forthcoming when the art showed signs of flagging, so perhaps we may hope that even now it is not too late for history to repeat itself.

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NOTE: All the works listed above contain a large number of reproductions. In some of them the text is of minor importance or has become out of date; this is specially applicable to those published before 1931.

